

## Preface

At the time I began this project, the bicentennial anniversary of the Haitian Revolution had reminded the world of the “horrors of Saint-Domingue,” the most brutal slave colony in history, out of which arose the most radical liberation movement of the so-called “Age of Revolutions.” Still, little scholarly attention had been devoted to the cultures of slavery of Old Regime France and, in particular, the texts and literary representations produced about them. While this may not seem surprising, given the historic suppression of colonialism and slavery in Western historiography and humanistic disciplines, more remarkable was that a certain silence around colonial slavery persisted in the very subdiscipline whose mission it was to promote the study of colonial legacies and non-European traditions in the humanities—postcolonial studies. Equally striking to me was that the burgeoning subfield of francophone Caribbean studies demonstrated considerable disregard for early colonial narratives and cultural history, despite the critical interest of literary specialists in theories of creolization that describe the emergence of syncretic cultural forms on the plantation. I soon discovered, however, that there were important reasons for these silences. For a literary scholar, it is immediately far more gratifying to read novels of slavery and colonialism written by postcolonial writers committed to reimagining the subversiveness, resistance, and intelligence of captive peoples than to confront the missionary relations, colonial histories, legal codes, travel literature, novels, and political treatises that represent the same people in quite different terms. At the same time, few of the categories and concepts current in postcolonial studies are useful in a discussion of the Old Regime cultures

of slavery in which the “other” was not native and there was so little ambivalence involved in the process of commodifying the human individual.

As I read on, however, I became convinced that these reasons were not sufficient cause to leave the serious study of French writing on the Caribbean to other disciplines. I felt that, not only were these neglected colonial texts fascinating in their own right, but that a literary analysis of them would have profound implications for some of the most difficult and contentious issues in Caribbean studies, while at the same time opening up new perspectives on modern francophone Caribbean literature and on early modern French literature and popular culture. In working with this corpus, the issues that concerned me were not limited to the rhetorical and ideological characteristics of the texts themselves or the ways in which they portrayed the power relation between the colony and the metropole. I also sought to identify which stories the published narrative record told or suppressed about the cultural, social, and sexual dynamics of colonialism and slavery in French territories, and the ways in which these dynamics changed over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That broad focus required a reconsideration of the object of literary analysis and the limits and possibilities of textual critique in a historical frame. In my view, the particular contribution of literary criticism to the study of cultures lies in its ability to go where historians often do not tread; on the basis of a close reading of a particular text, image, or anecdote, to imagine, as Joan Dayan has put it, what cannot be verified; to posit what could never have been documented in any historical archive; to recover the fantasies, beliefs, mentalities, and silences in which the desires and anxieties of historical subjects may be lodged; to consider, furthermore, the ways in which a text’s form and structure provide as much insight into the cultural conditions of its production as the manifest narrative it contains. In addition to supplementing and in some cases questioning dominant historical and anthropological understandings of early French Caribbean cultures, I therefore endeavored to produce a study of the first French colonial literature from the Caribbean region.

This book thus represents a historically situated literary interpretation of selected texts that provide insights into the process whereby radically different ethnic and national groups were coerced into coexistence and structured in social relations of domination based on race. In particular, my analyses shed light on the relationship between the cultural transformation and hybridization of transplanted populations and the emergence of borders of violence between them. In contrast to theorists of creolization who celebrate

the cultural and biological synthesis of different groups without examining the violent antagonisms across which such processes were negotiated, I seek to understand how the violence and desires enacted by the settler minority were instrumental in shaping Creole cultural forms, colonial racial ideologies, and the legal means by which the white elite established its hegemony in the Old Regime Caribbean.

Central to my inquiry is the concept of libertinage, through which writers continually defined the Caribbean as a space of spiritual, social, and moral deviance. While tracing this critique in accounts of cross-cultural encounters, piracy, colonial domesticity, occult practices and beliefs, slavery, and miscegenation written by representatives of the colonizing culture, I intervene in a number of debates about the cultural workings of colonialism and slavery in the Americas. These debates pertain to the representational value of European ethnographic accounts of Amerindian peoples, the social and cultural meanings of piratical violence and plantation agriculture, the relation between missionary ideology and the law of slavery, and the creolization of spirit beliefs. Most importantly, I ask how the concept of colonial libertinage might be expanded and redeployed to describe the impact of gender and sexuality on white elite racial discourses, political identity, and social practices in French Caribbean slave societies. My study of the narrative sources convinced me of the centrality of desire and sexuality to ideologies of racial domination espoused by members of the white elite over the course of the eighteenth century, ideologies which had their corollary in scenes of subjection and legal regimes of exclusion directed against free nonwhites. To illustrate this proposition, I develop an alternative understanding of libertinage as a sexual economy that undergirded exploitative power relations among whites, free people of color, and slaves. Drawing on literary and psychoanalytic criticism, historical research, and my own textual analyses, my theory of a “libertine colony” posits a relationship between white elite sexual engagements (coerced and consensual) with nonwhite women, slave and free, and the extreme segregationist regime that reached its apogee in the exceptionally brutal slave society of late-eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue.

Based on an analysis of legal and narrative discourses, I argue that, over time, elite white colonials imagined their relation to free nonwhites and slaves through a metaphor of illegitimate filiation. While rooted in the knowledge of the sexual relations that linked individuals across ethno-social groupings in the slave colony, this image offered the white elite a means of repressing its involvement in interracial libertinage by projecting the bur-

den of culpability and punishment onto both slave women and the growing class of free people of color, deemed the immoral carriers of a primal sin. Racially discriminatory legislation therefore became the primary mechanism by which the white elite attempted to control, manage, and suppress the social and economic consequences of interracial sexual relations. The ironic effect of such discrimination was to discipline indirectly white libertinage, while at the same time leaving elite men free to pursue their interracial desires with impunity, thus reinforcing white sexual hegemony in the colony. Close analysis of the fantasies inherent in narratives of race and reproduction produced in the libertine colony demonstrates, furthermore, the fundamentally incestuous structure of white colonial desire, a structure that arguably manifested itself on the plantation and in the discursive and legal persecution of free people of color in Saint-Domingue. The “libertine colony” thesis thus offers a means of understanding the centrality of desire and sexuality to notions of white Creole identity and political legitimacy in Saint-Domingue, as well as the concrete effects of such desires; in particular, their role in creating precisely those segregationist measures that were intended to erect an untransgressible social barrier between whites, free nonwhites, and slaves in Saint-Domingue.

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Reproduction and Family Romance in Moreau de Saint-Méry's *Description . . . de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue*," was published in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38.2 (2005): 227–46. I thank the publishers of these journals for their permission to reuse this material. All translations from texts in French are mine unless otherwise indicated. With the exception of citations to modern editions, I have retained the original spellings of titles of primary sources.

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